

Teacher dis/appointments? Transitions into and out of teaching.

Abstract

Teacher attrition comes at a professional, social and individual cost. The seeds of professional contentment or discontent are potentially sown early in one's career. Of the considerable research into teacher attrition, and into the early years of teaching, little appears to have investigated the dual transitions into teaching, and out of teaching into another career, and into the possible links between the two. Reporting on research conducted in Australia, this paper investigates 22 ex-teachers' recollections from their transitions from pre-service to the workplace, and examines why some of these teachers became disillusioned or disimpassioned with the profession. Most, but not all of the respondents had taught in Australia. The paper does not attempt to provide definitive solutions to the problems of teacher attrition, but rather, to illustrate with flesh-and-blood examples, some of the dilemmas faced by early career teachers. From their position as ex-teachers, these interviewees look through the 'prism' of their teaching, to its early days and beyond. The paper looks in particular at: transition from pre-service to in-service contexts; recruitment; and casual/supply teachers.

Introduction

The journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet.

Attributed to Laozi

The transition from pre-service contexts into teaching is by no means a straightforward one. The demands and expectations of teaching have proliferated in recent years. This is particularly evident with regard to pedagogical and other matters, such as monitoring student progress, record keeping and the like. While the responsibilities of many jobs have expanded considerably, it is worth noting that beginning teachers largely take on the same responsibilities of their more experienced counterparts. Moreover, new career teachers are often deployed to schools that are the most difficult to staff. These schools are often characterised by school populations that may be very different to those with whom the beginning teacher is familiar, in terms of features such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and on their 'reading' of school and its relevance for their lives. This intercultural experience has the potential to be a rich learning experience if new teachers can be helped and supported in their negotiation of this unfamiliar culture.

For some teachers, this period will coincide with events such as moving away from their parents' home, and perhaps into or out of a large city for the first time. Many teachers, particularly those who wish to work near where they undertook pre-service, are initially destined to be casual or supply teachers, and this generates its own demands and constraints. While the supply status also brings some relative freedoms, these come at the cost of a sense of professional community membership, financial and other forms of security, and long-term purpose.

Teacher education institutions at times attract criticism for an unwillingness or inability to prepare their students for the workplace. There exists a number of

incongruities between pre- and in-service contexts, in terms of levels of collaboration and other defining factors such as proportion of higher order thinking, management and administrative issues (Aubusson and Schuck, 2006; Corrie, 2000; Russell, 2005).

One question that needs to be asked concerns the constructs and expectations people have of teaching prior to their entry into the service, and whether the reality matches these constructs. This study sets out to investigate these ex-teachers' views and recollections on the transition from pre-service to in-service.

Review of the literature

A number of studies (e.g. Dinham, 1995; Schuck, Deer, Barnsley, Brady & Griffin, 2002; Ewing & Smith, 2002; Ramsay, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McCulla, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Aneess, 1994; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001) have reported on beginning teachers' needs, attitudes and dispositions. With regard to teacher shortages, Ingersoll (2001) exposed the myth of teacher shortages being attributed to retirements and increases in student numbers, asserting that it is teacher attrition, often within the early years, that is the major cause of the problem. These departing teachers take with them a valuable storehouse of knowledge, skills and experience (Buchanan, 2009a).

In various jurisdictions, between 40 and 50 percent of teachers appear leave within the first five years (Rinke, 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In what she variously refers to a "silent crisis" (p. 3) and a "revolving door" (p. 2), Rinke illustrates this with some of the associated statistics for Texas, where she cites an estimated cost of up to 2.9 billion dollars annually. The phenomenon is not restricted to 'the west'; Wang (2007) reports a 50 percent figure in a Chinese provincial context. Naturally, however, attrition is not restricted to the teaching profession.

Rinke (2007) refers to a U-shaped curve of teacher attrition, with those under 30 and those over 50 being the most likely to leave. What the research does not uncover, however, is the motives for these two groups. It is unlikely that the motives are identical. More disconcertingly, Rinke reports that teachers with higher qualifications are more likely to leave the profession. What we know is that these teachers take their advanced knowledge with them from the field. What may also be the case, however, is that these people undertook the higher qualification in order to optimise their chances to escape the gravitational force – for some a black hole - of teaching. This is perhaps linked with a perception or reality of limited promotion prospects in teaching.

This review investigates the literature in terms of the three main issues that emerged from this study: transition from pre- to in-service status; recruitment; casual/supply teaching. The main focus is on the first of these, the intercultural transition. Previous literature appears to deal with casual/supply teaching mainly in terms of its characteristic lack of employment security. There appears to be relatively little material on the added complexities of casual/supply teaching. Similarly, recruitment has mainly been discussed from employing bodies' points of view, in terms of finding the right, and the right number, of teachers. Less has been explored in terms of the efficiency of the process from the perspectives of intending teachers.

Transition from pre-service

The dissonances between pre- and in-service contexts are at times vast and overlooked. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002, p 106) speak of “praxis shock”, which “refers to teachers’ confrontation with the realities and responsibilities of being a classroom teacher that puts some of their beliefs and ideas about teaching to the test, challenges some of them, and confirms others”. Zeichner (2005, p. 118) apportioned the blame largely to universities, and comments that teaching and teacher education have been oversimplified by the public and the profession alike, observing that “many universities today treat teacher education as a self-evident activity both for school- and university-based teacher educators”. Goodlad (1984, p. 241), on the other hand, is more critical of schools, observing that

The gap between the rhetoric of individual flexibility, originality, and creativity in our educational goals and the cultivation of these in our schools reveals a great hypocrisy. From the beginning, students experienced school and classroom environments that condition them in precisely opposite behaviours – seeking ‘right’ answers, conforming, and producing the known.

Russell (2005, p. 1) takes up a position mid-way between the two, commenting that, “pre-service teacher education is easily seen as attempting to do too much too soon”, suggesting that some of what pre-service education sets out to achieve might be more effectively left until teachers enter the service. In a number of jurisdictions in Australia and elsewhere, employing bodies are increasing in-service requirements of beginning teachers.

Korthagen (2001, p. 66) provides the following advice for teacher educators, to serve their students “not by presenting ‘interesting theory’ but by first creating suitable experiences”. Pre-service teachers need to feel that they are “active participants in the construction of the content of the teacher education program” (Korthagen, 2001, p. 53). Korthagen, commenting on Stenhouse, goes on to say that

pedagogy is not the technical process of ‘transmitting’ prescribed curriculum content, but involves experimentation and inquiry by the teacher. Instead of having teachers become the executors of the plans of innovators from outside the schools [teachers should] keep control of their own work.

One salient feature of teaching is isolation. Schuck, Brady and Griffin (2005) discern four elements of beginning teacher concerns: support (as opposed to isolation), leadership, communication and relationships. Indeed, all of Schuck et al.’s elements could be subsumed by the term ‘relationships’. On the isolation front, Korthagen (2004, p. 91) observes “there are a frightening number of teachers striving on their own to give shape to the ideals they have – or had when they chose to take up a teaching career”. Ingersoll (2001) cites three main sources of teacher disillusionment with the profession: low salaries; student discipline problems including low motivation; and poor administrative support, including frustration at the inability to influence decision-makers. Of these three, two relate to a reality or perception of isolation. It appears that low salary is a particularly acute problem in the United States compared to many other developed nations.

Roberts (ny) points out a particular form of isolation, that of geographic isolation. Specifically, he points out the difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers in such locations, and the inadequacy of pre-service preparation for teaching therein. This is most likely a significant contributor to culture shock, especially for a young teacher who may be living 'away from home', and in a small community where anonymity is impossible, for the first time. Current high attrition rates in such communities perpetuate the problem. Each departure creates a new vacancy to be filled by another willing teacher. The high turnover rate also generates cynicism in such communities and among their school students. It is noted here that Australia is arguably beset more than many other countries by the problem of isolation. A smaller number of teachers from small towns may find themselves teaching for the first time in a big city, where anonymity is inevitable, and this, too, may exacerbate the adjustment to teaching. Roberts calls for the creation of working conditions that will attract teachers to such posts, and states that overcoming disadvantage for teachers is as important as overcoming disadvantage for learners in such circumstances. And yet, attraction of teachers *per se* is insufficient. It is retention of these teachers that is of equal importance.

It is ironic that a profession as relationship-dependent as teaching is characterised by isolation. McCallum (2008) makes a number of worthy suggestions for early career teachers to survive and thrive in their new positions. These include developing awareness, as well as communicating with self and others. These are essential accompaniments to good teaching that we fail to apply at our peril. She adds that, "this sense of connecting with others appeared as one of the strongest strategies for ... beginning teachers and contributed to them having a real sense of belonging" (p. 7).

In an Australian context, Buchanan (2006) found that perceptions of a theory/practice disparity between universities and workplaces might in fact be compounding or masking other disparities. There are significant differences between the contexts of teaching and learning in tertiary and primary/elementary or secondary education, and it may be that universities unknowingly conspire in their students' development of false constructs of their eventual working contexts. Buchanan's findings were set out in terms of a series of continua, along which schools and universities find themselves remote one from the other. These included: the relative behavioural and intellectual autonomy of tertiary students as opposed to their school counterparts, and implications this has for classroom management and administration, such as maintenance of attendance rolls, at university or school; and the higher proportion of higher order thinking activities at university, as opposed to rote learning of material such as spelling, particularly in a primary context. Moreover, pre-service teachers appear eager to experience, and produce for assessment purposes, high levels of creativity in their teaching. While admirable, this may establish an unsustainable standard in the context of teaching five hours per day, and may divert beginning teachers' attention from important matters of pastoral, managerial and administrative responsibilities.

The culture shock of teaching, especially in the early years, is exacerbated by the sheer work demands of the job. According to Connell (2007, p. 270) almost one in five teachers works more than 50 hours per week, and while, as Connell points out, class sizes have decreased over the years, the increases and complexity of responsibilities have probably more than offset this. Moreover, she points to a

growing disparity in this regard between private and public schools in Australia, the former enjoying increasing Federal Government funding. Connell echoes Grace's (1978) observation of dedication and immersion in the job leading to exhaustion. A trend towards corporatisation of education and schools is another 'creep factor' observed by Connell; managers, some of whom are from a commercial, rather than an educational background, set out to exact a higher level of (ill-defined) productivity from their staff, arguably at the cost of quality. Political forces, with their attendant basic skills testing, also appear to be driving schools in similar directions (McGettrick, 2005). As reported elsewhere (Buchanan, 2010), many of the ex-teachers in this study reported earning more and having fewer demands placed on them than was the case when they were teaching, even though, for most, salary was not the catalyst for their departure.

Lest teacher educators assume self-righteously that their own practice is immune to, even the remedy for, poor practices elsewhere, Russell (2004, p. 1202) observes that,

it may seem remarkable that teacher education could so easily assume that those who enter a pre-service teacher education program could be treated as 'blank slates', growing in knowledge of the subjects they will teach, but 'starting from scratch' in terms of how to go about teaching.

What might be the logical conclusion of these adjustment difficulties? Huberman (1989) described a teacher life cycle, wherein teachers negotiate stages such as discovery/survival, stabilization, experimentation/activism, reassessment/self doubt, serenity and disengagement; for teachers, a dour pathway and bleak.

Recruitment

Teaching arguably has both a surfeit and a deficit of teachers. While large numbers of teachers are on lists to be employed, there exist vacancies that are difficult to fill. The main two drivers of this phenomenon are the 'attractiveness' of a school and its community for prospective teachers, and supply and demand of teachers in particular subject areas.

While there exists literature on the competition between schools for teachers, and on recruitment into pre-service teaching, relatively little appears to have been written about the hiatus between graduating teachers and those taking up positions in the profession. Guarino, Santibañez, Daley and Brewer (2004) noted that the graduates of non-traditional teacher education programs exhibited higher entry rates into teaching than those from traditional programs. These alternative programs attracted a more diverse population. Guarino et al. also noted, however, that teacher testing requirements had an adverse effect on such minority populations. Anecdotally it also appears that those teachers who were schooled in rural communities are more likely to return to such communities to teach, but there appears to be little statistical data to support or refute this.

Some of the participants in the study reported on in this paper represent those whose voices have been difficult to hear, that is, those who have not entered teaching at all, having gained their qualification. Whereas exit interviews can be conducted with those leaving the profession, it is more difficult to locate and hear those who, despite being qualified to do so, never enter the profession.

Casual/supply/substitute teaching

As can be seen by the title above, a number of different terms is used for non-permanent teachers. The term 'casual' is used here. It is likely that a disproportionately high number of casual teachers is to be found among those in the early years of their career. In particular, this early career demographic is likely to be characterized by those who are not choosing casual status, but who are aspiring to full-time work. Ramsay (2008) excluded substitute teachers from his study of attrition, "to avoid exaggerating the attrition rates" (p. 1).

Casual/supply teachers may be working in a multiplicity of situations, demanding a very high level of familiarisation with processes, policies, names and other information in order to function effectively in each circumstance. All the while these teachers are also striving to familiarise themselves with some of the teaching and classroom management processes their more experienced counterparts take for granted. Shilling (1991) refers to these teachers as "working on the margins" (p. 3). O'Connor (2009) charges principals with the responsibility for supporting casual teachers, but the responsibility may need to be more broadly shared among school personnel.

Classroom management is problematic for all teachers, and especially for beginning teachers, where it may add to problems of culture shock. Nowhere is it more problematic, however, than for casual teachers. Little appears to have been written about this in the academic literature. We are left with the commonsense observation that for the casual teacher, lessons may constitute a 'home-and-away match', with the students feeling very much on home ground. Even more broadly with regard to classroom discipline, relatively little appears to have been written. Buchanan (2010) observed that researchers, systems and teachers alike appear to be reticent in discussing the issue, and it may have become one that "dare not speak its name" (p. 208).

As the above discussions suggest, a 'one size fits all' approach does not serve the profession well in terms of examining professiono-cultural factors and teacher responses, any more than it does in challenging and engaging school students to think creatively and laterally. The project reported on here contributes to the ongoing debate on the causes and effects of teachers leaving the profession, and on the dynamics that facilitate or frustrate pre-service and in-service support's effectiveness and appropriateness.

Most studies on teacher satisfaction have taken place *in tempore*, in that they have used beginning teachers as informants. The paper described here reports on the views of teachers who have since left the profession to pursue other careers. It adds a broader perspective to an understanding of issues such as teacher idealism and morale (Korthagen, 2004), both of which appear to be volatile. According to Williams (2002, p. 2, citing Merrow), what is seen as a recruitment problem is actually an issue of retention: "The teaching pool keeps losing water because no one is paying attention to the leak". This paper focuses on issues peculiar to beginning teachers.

Methodology

This study comprised a series of semi-structured interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) with 22 people (15 females, 7 males) who had left school teaching mid-career (see Appendix 1). The extent of their teaching experience ranged from less than a few months, to more than 20 years. Snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) was used to recruit participants, with the author's colleagues initially suggesting possible participants, who in turn suggested others. Excluded were people who still had formal teaching as a major part of their current work, such as university academics. Nevertheless, this is an inexact criterion, and a number of the respondents provide instruction or education as a significant part of their work. Coincidentally, the gender imbalance of this group is similar to that of the teaching cohort at large.

Views discussed included: How respondents 'saw themselves' as teachers; how and why they decided to leave or enter school teaching; whether their views have changed since making their decision to leave or enter teaching, if so, how and why (see Appendix 2). Prior to the interviews taking place, participants were presented with an interview protocol, to provide them with time prior to the interview to consider the questions therein.

The interviews were tape-recorded, then transcribed. The identity of the interviewees was unknown to the author as pseudonyms were provided on transcripts. Content was analysed for indicators of professional dis/satisfaction, their causes and teachers' responses. Interview transcripts were subjected to a coding process, outlining common as well as outlying causes, effects and circumstances surrounding the departure of teachers. The findings were critically reviewed for what they revealed about these ex-teachers' constructs of the profession and of teaching and learning. The study set out to discern, among other things, what these people expected of the profession and the extent to which these expectations were met or not. In its search for cause and effect, the study set out to demonstrate internal validity (Mitchell & Jolley, 2001). The ex-teachers were not asked if there was one particular catalyst for their departure, but in all cases, it appeared that there were multiple factors at work.

Limitations

The limits of snowball sampling are acknowledged here, in terms of seeking a representative sample. Also, many of the respondents recounted traumatic 'rescues' from teaching. It is possible that those with the most memorable departures will be more likely to self-select for a project such as this. Nevertheless, these recounts confirm what is known anecdotally about the demands of teaching.

Findings and discussion

These findings and discussion are grouped according to the three principal emergent themes of transition experiences, recruitment and the experiences of casual/supply teachers. All 22 respondents referred to their preservice experiences, as this was a specific interview question. Only one or two had nothing positive to say about their preservice experiences, and only one or two had no criticisms to make. Beyond this, all respondents who eventually did some teaching spoke of the difficulties in transitioning from preservice into the workforce. The same number of respondents, 11 in each case, made reference to casual teaching and to recruitment. In all, 15 out of the 22 respondents made mention of one or other of these related issues. Perhaps

because of the narrative nature of their responses, for all respondents, it emerged that there was no single catalyst that drove them to leave teaching; for all of them, it was an accumulation of problems that led to their decisions.

The transition from pre-service to in-service

I thought I would be a teacher for life.

Naomi

I was pretty naïve and certainly when I did my Dip Ed ... I really wasn't prepared for what I was going to face.

Ron

The shock of teaching was substantial for many of these ex-teachers. In a number of cases, it culminated from a number of factors, including student behaviour, workload, and most particularly, a feeling of isolation and lack of support.

Most of these teachers entered the service with high ideals, and were keen to make a difference for the better. In some cases, this stood in particularly stark contrast to the disillusionment they recollected later. Patrick credited his idealism in part to the good teachers he had had at school. Toward the end of his pre-service term, Colin, "became very excited about getting out into the teaching world". Mark "went into teaching to use skills to help change or grow minds that would make a difference in the future". Perhaps the most poignant comments were from Lauren, who recalled, "you're very idealistic when you come out of college and you're going to change the world and all that sort of stuff". She then went on to say, "I felt that all my ideals that were nurtured in college were basically just crushed in that first year".

There were mixed views in terms of how well pre-service courses prepared teachers for their job. Several of the interviewees raised specific criticisms of their pre-service experiences. Colin found that pre-service had not prepared him for administrative demands such as roll marking. Ron could not recall anything that his pre-service education had taught him. Mark, on the other hand reported that his pre-service experiences prepared him well for teaching, and Lauren was yet more forthcoming with praise: "the confidence, the presentation, the group control, all those things we learnt at college have been fantastic. Nurturing, creativity and making your lessons interesting have been really good". It is perhaps worth noting here that, as suggested by her use of the perfect tense, Lauren was speaking in terms of how her teacher education continued to serve her well in a subsequent career.

Fiona recollected that her pre-service experiences prepared her well in terms of content knowledge, but not classroom management. Denise said that teaching was "harder than I expected. I realised that the college hadn't done a very good job of preparing me for it. A lot of the subjects had been irrelevant and there were a lot of things I didn't know". These last two comments sum up a common criticism of teacher education, in that it prepares teachers well, overly so in the eyes of some, for content and theory, but less so in the basic or survival skills of discipline and broader issues of classroom management. It is worth keeping in mind that the majority of

teacher educators have left school teaching, many of them (us!), some time ago. Angela described classroom management as “a constant, constant stress”. Issues of behaviour management have been discussed in other papers generated by this study (Buchanan, 2009b; 2010).

The adjustment to teaching experienced by these interviewees found expression in a number of ways. By comparison with their subsequent, and in some cases, previous careers, several of these people were critical of the way their schools were managed. Paul observed, “I don’t think education administrators are very good managers. I don’t think they’re well trained in that area”. Hayley found a number of things about her private school “very archaic”, including having to listen to a “pompous headmaster” during staff meetings that she saw as irrelevant.

Similarly, the extent and quality of mentoring in schools seemed to vary in the opinion of the respondents. Mark noted that while there were experienced teachers at his school, “there was never that developmental, mentoring role that was taken by any of them”. He added, “then I drifted out of teaching”. Fiona encountered a clash of cultures with her supervising teacher, who was a traditionalist, whereas she was a constructivist. This was further complicated by their co-teaching of some classes. In some cases, the lack of support for new teachers manifested itself as an anti-intellectualism and a cynical disdain for excellence, and/or for the potential of the children being taught. This was particularly confronting for these new teachers’ sense of idealism.

For a number of the teachers, the change from pre- to in-service was vast. This was exacerbated for Kathy, who moved from Sydney to a much smaller inland town to teach. She lamented, “I missed family. I missed the coast. I missed invisibility”, referring to relative lack of privacy for a teacher in a small community. Angela found herself “too far from everything ... all my support systems. I was a single parent with young children and I also had a fairly severe medical problem. I had to travel four hours to get to a doctor”. As noted earlier, isolation is a particular problem in Australia.

Not all of the teachers left in their early years. Janelle’s case could be referred to as a “mid-career crisis”. She had been teaching for 20 years, and had 21 years of work remaining. At this point, she began to notice, “teachers who were disheartened in their last few years of teaching ... teachers who were tired, teachers who didn’t want to be there, who were just seeing out their retirement, who were short-tempered and disinterested with their students, who lost their passion ... that sort of malaise”. She was keen to avoid the possibility of that trajectory for herself.

For some of these teachers, the problems of the early years were worsened by teaching outside of their field of expertise. Jenny recalled having to teach Health, even though she was trained in Languages other than English.

For others, the job simply was not what they expected. Chris spoke in glowing terms about the executive, staff and students at her school, but “the job was just not for me”.

As can be seen from these respondents’ observations, the day-to-day realities of classroom teaching can stand in stark contrast to the ideals of an idealistic newcomer.

Many of them experienced indifference, if not hostility, from their peers, their supervisors, the students, parents and community.

Recruitment

So I did get into teaching and I loved my course. I loved my university degree. I really enjoyed it and totally got involved in it and thought, “yes, I’m going to be the best teacher ever. And the public system is the way to go. I’m not going to work in private schools”. And I ended up working in private schools because they’re the ones that come and offer you a job, you know, in October instead of having to wait until whatever it is to find out what the Department is going to offer you.

Hayley, ex-primary teacher

I didn’t choose it. It was chosen for me by the Department.

Jillian, describing her first appointment.

The two main problems cited by teachers in the study reported on in this paper were the speed with which they were offered a position, and perceived inflexibilities in recruitment processes. Lest this appear as a sustained criticism of the employing bodies in education, it is recognised that dealing with such a large workforce, and needing to fill positions in ‘descending order’ of principals, deputies etc in a short time frame, must present a highly challenging set of logistics. It is likely that this is as frustrating a process for these bureaucracies as it is for the new teachers. Hayley’s comment, above, is further evidence of the idealism with which new teachers enter the profession.

It appears that at least some of these teachers became more exacting with the passage of time, in terms of a posting that would be acceptable to them. As a result, it seemed that a position that might have been acceptable immediately upon graduation, was deemed unsatisfactory 12 months later. Despite the difficulties acknowledged above, time appears to be of the essence in securing new teachers to the profession.

For a number of the respondents, other options emerged or were sought while the recruitment process was taking place. For some, it was another job, for others, it was a chance to travel, which meant forfeiting their position on the ‘list’ of prospective teachers, while for others again it was having their own children. Having returned from travelling, Melinda found that, “I would have had to re-apply and therefore go to the bottom of the government list again. I thought that my chances of getting a teaching job in the near future were pretty slim. So that was ... why I found another job”.

As well as becoming more demanding in terms of what they wanted from their work, some of the respondents lost hope as time went by. Melinda reported, “I knew that if I got a full-time job, it probably wasn’t going to be close to where I was living, so that prompted me to do other things”. Similarly, Lauren recalled, “I went looking [for other work] because I was paranoid that I would not get a job at the end of 12 months, so I started looking before the end of the school year”. Some teachers saw few career

prospects as they looked beyond their early years. As Geoff pointed out, “promotion required mobility. You needed to be willing to go west or Woop Woop or places like that”.

In some cases, the reasons for declining a teaching position were mainly circumstantial. Naomi intended to accept a permanent position in teaching, when one was offered to her by phone. The next day

the kids were bad and I’d completely lost confidence by then. So I just rang and said, “I don’t want the position”. And, boy oh boy, they weren’t very happy about that. So that was shutting the door on my teaching career.

Naomi commented that she is not characteristically shy, adding that she’s the national sales manager for her current employer.

A recruitment system that positioned candidates in a passive role was unattractive for some candidates. Melinda recalled one aspect that,

turned me off a little bit was the fact that I couldn’t go up to school and sell myself into a position. I really didn’t like the idea of being given a position ... I mean, I was quite happy doing teaching. If the opportunity to go overseas didn’t happen I probably would have stayed in teaching.

A recruitment process that is seen, rightly or wrongly, to be cumbersome and inefficient undermines confidence in early career teachers – both those who enter and stay in teaching and those who don’t. The impersonal nature of the recruitment process was another aspect noted by some of these respondents. This only served to exacerbate feelings of isolation on the part of these new teachers.

Casual and fractional teaching

You’d never go back there again. Especially with the older children, you were basically just a policeman in the classroom. That was horrible. I had one class in the centre of London, where I could not even make myself heard to introduce myself when I arrived. I said to the children, “well, anyone who would like to learn something today come and spend some time down with the rest of us and all the rest of you can do whatever you like”. And in that school there were no full-time teachers; they were all casual staff. It was really, really sad. I had a lovely time with the children who wanted to learn. At the end of the day one little boy came up to me and said, “could you come back again? I’ve really enjoyed it”. I said to this child, “I’m sorry, but no. I can’t come back to this school”.

Hayley, ex-teacher, admin assistant to a CEO

If I had been offered a permanent position, I would have accepted it.

Robyn

The respondents in this study reported some harrowing anecdotes of their students' behaviour. It is possible that they felt less constrained in doing so than might current teachers. As can be seen from the first quote above, problems of behaviour management are not confined to any one jurisdiction. Classroom management is but one of the issues confronting the casual teacher.

Denise was appointed as a 'reserve teacher' and would fill in for a teacher who was absent. This meant that work and income were not guaranteed, and that continuity was virtually impossible. Melinda had,

done a year of casual and didn't particularly like it. Not knowing where you were going every day. I thought the kids were a bit hard to handle when you're a casual teacher in some schools. It didn't really appeal to me.

Lauren secured a 12-month casual position. When asked in the interview if she was looking for a permanent position during this time, she replied,

I guess I wasn't actively looking. I was thinking I would be offered one. I was offered a permanent one in the 12 months at a high school. I just was not keen on the area and got a bit fussy and thought I don't want to go there.

By the beginning of the next school year, Lauren had found a job outside of teaching.

For Christine, casual teaching was particularly unrewarding: she recounted "four days at different schools casual teaching. I hated every one of them". It probably needs to be added, though, that Christine just didn't find the nature of the job appealing, and that changing conditions would not necessarily have kept her in teaching.

Melinda left casual teaching to travel overseas. Because of her casual status, she did not have the option of taking leave without pay. When she returned, she had to reapply to the Department and join the bottom of the list. She decided that it would take too long for her to gain employment this way, and pursued other options. She claimed that if she had had a permanent job, she probably wouldn't have travelled, and if she did, she would have had a job to return to. Similarly, Naomi accepted a sales representative job because she couldn't find permanent work in her area. Much as she misses some aspects of teaching, her current circumstances are too attractive for her to abandon them. While Fiona was in a permanent position, she was only offered part-time work, which she found unsatisfactory. Having a young family, moving to teach in a different area was not feasible. The costs of moving also need to be recognised here, and the implications for salary levels. It is worth noting that in recent years, 'eligibility lists' have become more flexible in a number of jurisdictions.

Naomi observed that the daily casual teaching rate looks attractive, but dispersed over 52 weeks of the year, pales in comparison with a salary. Several of the respondents saw salary as a manifestation of the professional esteem accorded to teachers, even though, for most, it was not a critical factor in their leaving. Also, for many of these ex-teachers, several factors compounded to lead them out of the profession, such as working conditions as well as career security.

Career-disruption owing to parenthood was a significant issue for some of the interviewees. As Jillian observed, “to go back to teaching [after having a child] was an attractive idea, but I knew how difficult it would be to become a permanent teacher and I couldn’t rely on casual work”. More recently, as in many other professions, provisions for teachers to take parental leave have improved markedly.

While some teachers maintain their casual status by choice, this was not so for these beginning teachers, or, most likely, for the majority of beginning teachers, who aspire to permanent work. One further dimension of collateral damage for the teachers who leave the profession in their early years, is that they do not get to witness their optimal teacher-selves, armed with several years’ experience. Similarly, the profession as a whole is less experienced than it would otherwise be. As Chris observed, “I think you’re pretty crappy in your first year anyway”.

It is reasonable to assume that a proportion of teachers who remain in teaching also sense some of the frustrations of these teachers. Addressing these issues, and in particular, helping teachers to feel more supported and less isolated, will lead not only to a reduction in attrition rates, it will increase satisfaction among those remaining in teaching.

Few of these ex-teachers would willingly return to the profession. Paul, for example, “would find it immensely constraining, the relatively small world of a school”.

Conclusions and recommendations

‘Conclusions’ is perhaps too lofty a title for this section. It purports not to expound definitive solutions to the problems of teacher attrition, but to interpret and pass on the advice offered by these ex-teachers. Moreover, most of the former teachers in this study had worked primarily in one location, NSW in Australia. While each jurisdiction has its specific strengths and weaknesses with regard to recruitment and support of early career teachers, some of the lessons these ex-teachers offer may well be salutary both within and beyond this jurisdiction. It is also conceded here that some of these issues may well be beyond the control of teacher administration systems, and that many systems are already tackling some of these issues. Suffice it to say that making the profession more appealing will assist in attracting as well as retaining higher quality professionals.

Further research into why people choose teaching as a career may be instructive. In this study, some of the respondents spoke of a familiarity with teaching. Chris, for example, said that she “knew what primary teaching might entail”. This is perhaps a significant factor in choosing teaching. It is a profession familiar to almost all of us, because of our own time in school. It may be that this is a significant factor in many teachers’ career choice – that of a familiar and therefore safe-looking profession. Further research would confirm or refute this.

With regard to managing the transition into teaching, pre-service environments have limited opportunities to equip their students with practical experience in matters such as classroom management. Nevertheless, practicum is one such opportunity. It may be that the quest for creative teaching strategies blinds students to the less glamorous

strategies on the part of their supervising teachers with regard to classroom management.

Another message here for tertiary institutions is to include some attention to the culture shock of entering teaching, in the hope that graduates might not be faced with the dilemma of abandoning either their idealism or their vocation. A greater sandwiching, or blurring of the lines between pre- and in-service contexts, with more highly developed partnerships between universities and school systems, may also alleviate or at least address some of these problems.

Speed in recruitment appears to be one way of increasing retention rates among graduate teachers. As time went by, prospective teachers either became disillusioned and/or other prospects – professional and/or personal - emerged for them. Also, some of the informants indicated that they became more demanding in terms of the kind of position they would accept as time went by. It may be that the euphoria in the immediate period after graduation serves as a catalyst for a greater willingness to accept job opportunities that present themselves. This is the case not just for competing agencies within teaching, such as the public and private sectors, but between teaching and other professions.

Difficult-to-staff schools are just that, and so the schools with the highest likelihood of vacancies are the same ones that are less attractive to many beginning teachers. Further compounding this, while teaching positions might be more readily available in smaller rural or isolated communities, other job prospects might be more scarce, and this creates a dilemma for a teacher who is partnered with a non-teacher. Allocation of funds for the purpose of overcoming disadvantage at such schools could perhaps be used to offer incentives such as a reduction in face-to-face teaching for beginning teachers therein. This would have the dual benefit of improving working conditions and contributing to a higher quality of teaching/learning, given the extra preparation time.

The conditions outlined above are all the more complex for casual/supply teachers. Admittedly, this is equally a complex problem for employers. Any means of offering a measure of security to such teachers might be a good way of adding value to them. One example might be the appointment of ‘roving teachers’ to one or two schools, with a guaranteed minimum of, say, four days’ employment per week. Finding and having meaningful contact with a mentor is much less likely for a casual teacher working at several schools. While more attention is currently being paid to mentoring in a number of jurisdictions, associated demands to acquire certain numbers of hours of in-service professional development can be seen by some early career teachers as an additional burden. Again, for casuals this might be more problematic, in that schools are unlikely to pay for a casual’s time spent in undertaking professional development activities.

It would be a distortion to isolate these factors alone in ascertaining the reasons for teacher attrition. Personal and other factors also played a part. As Fiona said, “I’m a relatively quiet person and I didn’t have that enthusiasm and whatever that X factor is that makes students go ‘wow!’” Nevertheless, while teaching demands certain levels of leadership, modelling, confident direction and inspiration, it would be unfortunate if teaching were to become unquestioningly equated with being a showman/woman.

Some of the working conditions referred to in this study have improved markedly in the time since these ex-teachers' experiences. Parental leave is one such example. Another is an increased attention to mentoring, which these ex-teachers had not experienced, except in very serendipitous ways. Nevertheless, other professions have made similar advances, leaving teaching with a nil sum gain in this respect. Other conditions, such as accountability and classroom management, have become more problematic. It should be kept in mind that a growing cynicism is probably part of the human condition, and is common to members of all professions, as is attrition. Nevertheless, as Ingersoll (2001) points out, attrition among teachers appears to be higher than in many other careers.

It is contended here that the teaching profession at times fails to apply its learning about teaching to its new members. It occasionally treats its newcomers as blank slates, who arrive knowing nothing of worth, and in the same breath asking "why didn't you learn that at university?" It tends to under-support, under-affirm and under-mentor new teachers. And, while professing the virtues of collaborative learning, it may leave new teachers isolated. I return here to Schuck et al.'s (2005) four elements of early career teacher concerns: support, leadership, communication and relationships, or perhaps more succinctly, collegiality (Abdallah, 2009). Many of the teachers in this study portrayed a rather solitary image of their time in teaching. They felt alone in the face of occasional hostility on the part of their students, and indifference or an inability to help on the part of their superiors, and in some cases, their peers. If we are to assume that many teachers enter the profession with the noble ideal of wanting to effect change for the better, it should not come as a surprise that they see their idealism, energy and commitment draining away before too long in the absence of support.

One mantra of the Twenty-first Century is that employees will typically have multiple careers during their working lives. Teacher attrition is therefore inevitable. By the same token, if this truism is true, then the teaching profession needs to be competitively attractive. It is also said of Generations Y and Z, those who are likely to be the focus of recruitment, that they position themselves as clients rather than as applicants in the recruitment process. For better or worse, they are likely to be more exigent than were their predecessors. These two factors add to the mandate for teaching to be a competitive profession in terms of what it offers its incumbents.

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Appendix 1 Summary of participant details

| | Subject/s | Approximate teaching experience | Subsequent occupation/s |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Angela | Primary | 16 years | Nursing |
| Carol | Science/computing | 10 years | Bank teller |
| Christine | Primary | 9 months | Communications officer |
| Colin | Science | 9 months | Museum curator |
| David | Agriculture | 15 years | Small business retail |
| Fiona | Science | 2 years | Full-time student |
| Geoff | Science | 14 years | Chaplain |
| Hayley | Primary | 3.5 years | Executive assistant to CEO |
| Jacqui | Primary | 30 years | Entertainment venue manager |
| Janelle | Science | 21 years | Medical student |
| Jenny | English/French, ESL | 18 months | Student administration |
| Jillian | Primary | 2 years | Librarian |
| Kathy | English | 9 years | Data entry |
| Lauren | Home Economics | 1 year | Youth work; management |
| Mark | Primary | 6 years | Clerical/legal work |
| Melinda | Primary | 2 years | Admin assistant |
| Naomi | English | 2.5 years | Sales representative |
| Pamela | Primary | 18 years | Day-care centre manager |
| Patrick | Maths | 15 months | Financial market |
| Paul | English/History | 4 years | Workplace staff development |
| Robyn | Primary | 2 years | Librarian |
| Ron | Middle school | 20 years | Chaplain |

Appendix 2: Interview Protocol for Ex-Teachers

How long were you in teaching?

What kept you in teaching for that long?

What eventually led you to leave?

What view of teaching did you have before you entered the profession (say, in your final year/s of pre-service)?

To what extent did this coincide with the reality of teaching for you in the early years?

Had you thought much or at all about the length of time you would probably spend in teaching?

As you look back on that transition time – as you decided to leave, how do/did you feel? What thoughts were going through your mind?

Is there anything that would/could have kept you in the teaching profession?

To what extent (if at all) do you use the skills and knowledge you gained in teaching in your current work?

To what extent, if at all, did your teaching skills etc shape your decision to move into your current career?

How would you compare your teaching work to your current work in the following areas:

Salary:

Workload:

Responsibility:

Working conditions:

'Prestige' of the job

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the University of Technology, Sydney, for providing an Internal Research Grant for the completion of this project. I am also grateful to the 22 ex-teachers who shared their stories, some of them harrowing, with me. Thanks to Janet Cook for her interviewing and transcribing.

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